

**The New York Review of Books**

## **The Instrumentalist**

Zadie Smith

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At the heart of the film *Tár* is a conductor who cannot see beyond her generation's field of vision.



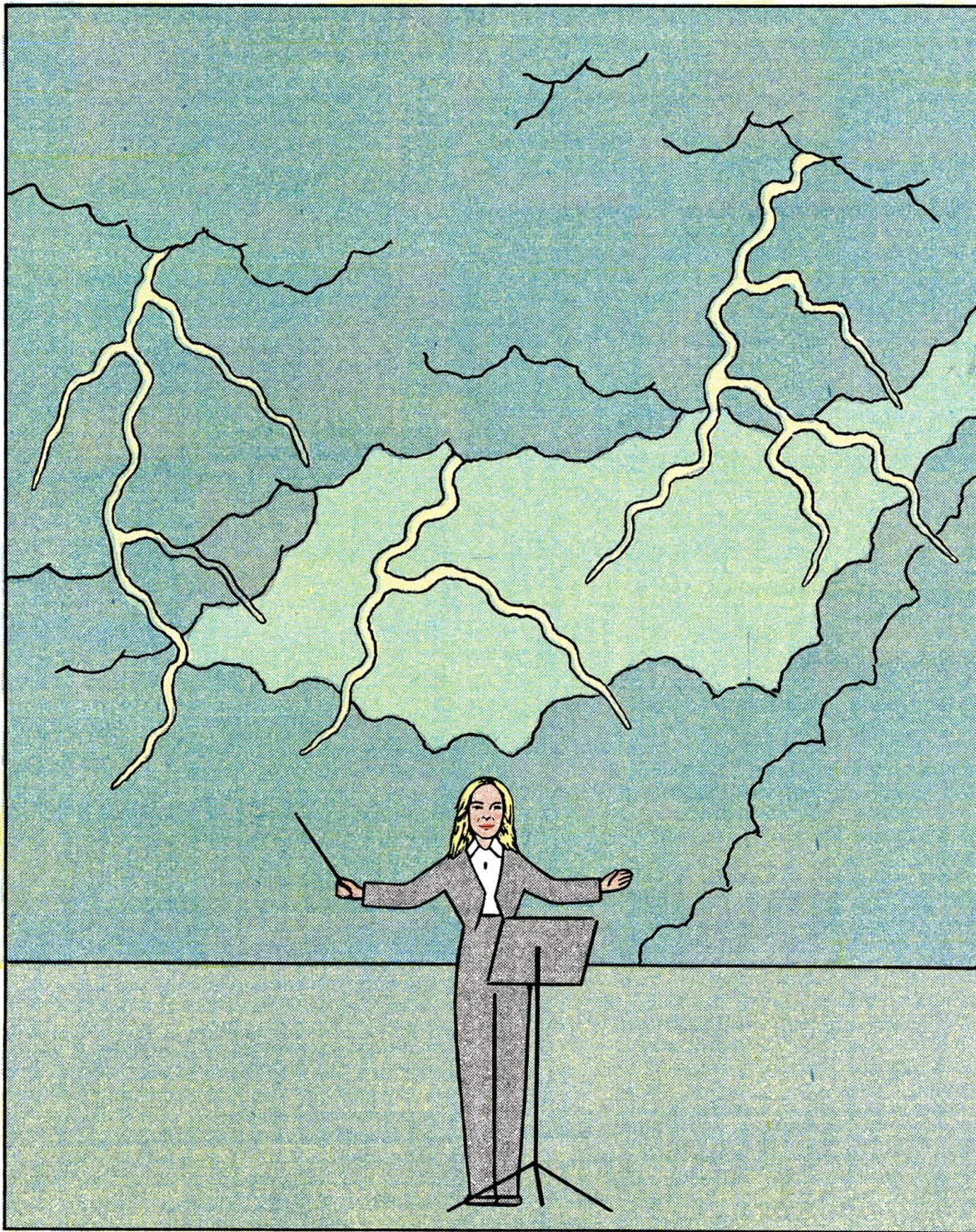


Illustration by Alain Pilon

**Reviewed:**

**Tár**

a film written and directed by Todd Field

During the first ten minutes of *Tár*, it is possible to feel that the critic Adam Gopnik is a better



actor than Cate Blanchett. They sit together on a New Yorker Festival stage. Gopnik, playing himself, is a relaxed and fluid interviewer. His interviewee, the (fictional) conductor Lydia Tár, is stiff and self-conscious—actorly, even. As Gopnik recounts Tár’s many achievements, her face remains fixed in its pose of false humility, and when she speaks, she offers her audience a series of eloquent but overly rehearsed *bons mots*:

We don’t call women astronauts “astronettes.”

Time is the essential piece of interpretation.

You cannot start without me. See, I start the clock.

But Blanchett has it exactly right. She is doing what the talent is always doing at these things: acting. Self-fashioning, repeating witticisms they’ve used many times before, pretending to consider questions long settled in their own minds. After which the talent goes home, to their backstage life.

If the talent is a Cultural Luminary, backstage is likely to be even more glamorous than front-of-house. Pristine Poggenpohl kitchens and \$30,000 sectionals and discreetly disguised safes sunk into great expanses of undivided wall. A loft that stretches a city block. Such is the life of Lydia Tár. Her daughter, Petra, attends a bourgeois German private school and her wife, Sharon, is first violin in Tár’s own orchestra, the most prestigious in Berlin. Tár maintains a second apartment in the city, for those moments when she needs privacy.

Cultural Luminaries make a lot of money. Their imperious attitudes and witty *bons mots* are in demand everywhere—until they aren’t. As Tár discovers the very next morning, while guest teaching at Juilliard. Here her charismatic lone-genius shtick—which so delighted the gray-haired festivalgoers—falls on stonier ground. Tár is now speaking to a different generation. The generation that says things like *I’m not really into Bach*. Such statements are calculated

to bring out the hysteric in a middle-aged Cultural Luminary, and Tár immediately takes the bait, launching into an aggressive defense laced with high-handed pity (for the young man who dares say it) and a more generalized contempt for his cohort.

The young man is named Max. He has a very gentle demeanor and a sweet, open face, and seems in no way to be seeking confrontation. Asked how he felt about Bach, he simply answered. But now, under Tár's verbal assault, he attempts to expand his critique: "Honestly, as a BIPOC pangender person, I would say Bach's misogynistic life makes it kind of impossible for me to take his music seriously..." The battle lines are drawn. Max is a young snowflake. Tár's an Art Monster.<sup>1</sup> She's also a (self-described) "U-Haul Lesbian," although this aspect of her identity won't help her much. In *Tár*, time is the essential piece of interpretation, and there's an awful lot of time these days between people in their twenties and people in their fifties. Sometimes it feels like the gap has never been wider.

To paraphrase Schopenhauer—who gets several shout-outs in *Tár*—every generation mistakes the limits of its own field of vision for the limits of the world. But what happens when generational visions collide? How should we respond?

As we learn in her classroom, Tár's method is direct combat. For she is Gen X—like me—and one of the striking things about my crowd is that although we like to speak rapturously of emotion in the *aesthetic* sense, we prefer to scorn emotions personally (by way of claiming to not really have any) and also to trample over other peoples'. It doesn't occur to Tár that sweet young Max may have serious trouble with anxiety—although we in the audience certainly notice his knees bouncing frantically. The power differential between these two means that a rant Tár might launch into around a dinner table in Berlin—to much receptive laughter—is experienced as ritual humiliation by a young man exposed in front of his peers. But Tár is



discombobulated also. It's a long climb down from Cultural Luminary to Contra, and no doubt a great shock to find yourself so sharply reassessed and redefined by the generation below you.<sup>2</sup> Do twenty-five years of glass-ceiling breaking and artistic excellence count for nothing? It's enough to pitch a girl into a midlife crisis.

What if Tár had taken a deep breath and tried a different approach? Invited Max to lie under the piano, say, while she played some Bach, then inquired after his feelings about that experience? After which perhaps they could have switched positions, with Max playing and Tár lying down. She might ask him what it felt like to consider the music while simultaneously considering the man who made it. Can an A-minor chord be misogynistic? Is an individual human ever really the *sole* source of any particular piece of music in the first place? Instead, Tár mounts a familiar high horse:

Unfortunately, the architect of your soul appears to be social media. You want to dance the masque, you must service the composer.... You must in fact stand in front of the public and God and obliterate yourself.

We of Tár's generation can be quick to lambaste those we call (behind their backs) "the youngs," but speaking for myself, *I'm* the one severely triggered by statements like "Chaucer is misogynistic" or "Virginia Woolf was a racist." Not because I can't see that both statements are partially true, but because I am of that generation whose only real shibboleth was: "Is it interesting?" Into which broad category both evils and flaws could easily be fit, not because you agreed with them personally but because they had the potential to be analyzed, just like anything else.<sup>3</sup> Whereas if you grew up online, the negative attributes of individual humans are immediately disqualifying. The very phrase *ad hominem* has been rendered obsolete, almost incomprehensible. An argument that is directed against a person, rather than the position they are maintaining? Online a person *is* the position they're maintaining and vice versa. Opinions are

identities and identities are opinions. Unfollow!

These opposing sensibilities make perfect sense to those born into them. Both appear moronic and dangerous to the other side. And so Max and Tár really *can't* with each other. It's almost comic how precisely each generation intuits the trigger points of the one before. To the popcorn-eating boomers we must seem like so many parents and children locked in a Jacob-and-the-angel struggle, neither party willing to concede an inch. Yet what if we refused to let go until some form of mutual blessing was conferred?

"You're a fucking bitch," Max tells Tár.

"And you are a robot!" Tár tells Max.

Back in Berlin, after a long day bravely combating the youngs and flying first class, Tár falls exhausted into her wife's arms. Tár is off duty in baseball cap and cashmere, but glamour clings to her, and Sharon, dowdy only by comparison, seems somewhat in awe. And we are certainly curious about this marriage, but in these lean times we are even more curious about the furnishings. The camera takes us on a tour of objects, precisely indexed à la Wes Anderson, but in the subdued European palette of Michael Haneke. Perfectly ordered scores bound in blue cloth with unbroken spines. Immaculate bookshelves. A gleaming grand piano.

But should we pity our scandalously successful Tár, just a little? Some of the frostiness of her onstage life seems to have bled into her backstage interpersonal relations. Even her daughter calls her Lydia. Or maybe it's just that her family doesn't see her very much. Cultural Luminaries travel a lot. In their brief spells back home, they have many breakfast and lunch meetings and proudly drive their kids to school three days in a row. In the gaps between work-dates, they try to listen to what their put-upon personal assistant is telling them:

*Assistant:* I received another weird email from Krista. How should I reply.

*Tár*: Don't.

*Assistant*: This one felt particularly desperate.

*Tár*: Hope dies last.

*Hope dies last*. Germany has the best idioms. Americans prefer *There's always hope!* which, though cheering, is demonstrably untrue. Everything ends, even hope. But at this point we don't know what exactly has ended or how badly, who Krista is, what has passed between her and Tár, or who is the guilty party. We are in Tár's hybrid vehicle, watching her drive Petra to her fancy school. Petra is being bullied by a classmate and Tár is off to do some helicopter parenting. En route, Tár and Petra recite "Who Killed Cock Robin?," that old nursery rhyme about the attribution of guilt:

Who'll toll the bell?  
I, said the Bull,  
because I can pull,  
I'll toll the bell.

In the schoolyard, the offending eight-year-old girl is pointed out to Tár, who bends down to eye level, introduces herself—"I'm Petra's father"—then goes to town:

I know what you're doing to her. And if you ever do it again, do you know what I'll do? I'll *get* you. And if you tell any grown-up what I just said, they won't believe you. Because I'm a grown-up. But you need to believe me: I will get you. Remember this, Johanna: God watches all of us.

An electrifying scene. We are by now used to apocalyptic bad guys with the end of the world in mind, but it's a long time since I went to the movies and saw an accurate representation of an ordinary sinner. It reminded me of that extraordinary Sharon Olds poem "The Clasp," in which a woman, angry with her four-year-old daughter, holds the child too hard by the wrist:



she swung her head, as if checking  
who this was, and looked at me,  
and saw me—yes, this was her mom,  
her mom was doing this. Her dark,  
deeply open eyes took me  
in, she knew me, in the shock of the moment  
she learned me. This was her mother, one of the  
two whom she most loved, the two  
who loved her most, near the source of love  
was this.

Scene by scene we are learning Tár, much as the poet's daughter "learned" her mother—and a lot of what we learn is frightening. If poor little Johanna mistakes Lydia Tár for an omnipotent God, she's not too far off the mark. Conductors *are* godlike. *You can't start without me*. They are the first cause of music. But women as gods, as artists—as first causes of anything—can still be a tricky proposition, especially, for some reason, in recent independent cinema. In the multiplexes, superheroines are busy flexing their much-celebrated biceps, but over in the art houses, the concept of the "independent woman" is being subjected to a little narrative passive aggression. In *The Worst Person in the World*, a Gen X graphic novelist gets terminal cancer to offset the destabilizing effect of his ex-girlfriend/muse becoming an artist herself. In *Triangle of Sadness*, the modeling industry is symbolically freighted with all the many sins of late capitalism—perhaps because it is one of the few trades in which women are the first cause of everything.<sup>4</sup>

But Tár is not at all like the convenient symbolic females to be found in those films. She is something far more destabilizing and radical: a human being in crisis. And not just any crisis! The least fashionable on earth: the midlife kind. I write this not as excuse or explanation, only as diagnosis. In any human life there are several overlapping crises, political and collective, individual and generational. It is of course possible to disagree philosophically and politically on their relative importance, but not I think to deny their simultaneous existence. Yet when we are young, how absurd does the

midlife crisis seem? Pathetic! What is *wrong* with these people?

What's wrong with these people is that they are going to die, and for the first time in their lives, they really know that. In the curious case of Gen X, we seem to be taking this shocking revelation both personally and collectively, maybe because the end of *our* time and the end of *time itself* have become somewhat muddled in our minds. Our backs hurt, the kids don't like Bach anymore—and the seas are rising! As the kids themselves say, it's a lot. Surely there should be someone to blame for this terrible collision of the apocalypse and our own cultural and physical obsolescence—but who? The millennials? Gen Z? Cock Robin? In *Tár*, Gen X's confusion of cause and effect is sometimes too baldly stated. We get that overfamiliar culture war between Tár and Max. We get Tár wondering aloud whether Schopenhauer can still be taken seriously, given that he pushed his own wife down the stairs.

But *Tár* is at its strongest when channeling its existential dread through other, more cinematic means. When Tár goes jogging through the Berlin woods and hears a young woman screaming somewhere, she stops in her tracks, with a guilty, panicked look on her face—but is unable to locate the source. Who is in pain? And who is to blame? Surely not Lydia Tár? Schopenhauer apparently measured a person's intelligence by their "sensitivity to noise"—or so a colleague informs Tár during one of her many meetings—and back at the loft she is woken in the night by strange noises she can't identify. Is it the fridge? The air conditioning? Tearing apart her expensive home, she finds a metronome ticking in the safe. Ticking like a countdown. Tár is a very intelligent woman indeed, but her sensitivities turn out to be limited in certain areas. Yes, for our Lydia, time's (almost) up. The bell is tolling and it's tolling for her.

**B**ut first, like any bad guy, she attempts to cover her tracks. We watch her e-mailing everyone she knows in the music community to warn them of an unstable young woman called

Krista Taylor, who may be spreading untrue rumors about her. Then checking Twitter to see if said rumors have broken out into the world. We begin to get the picture. Krista is a young, aspiring conductor. Tár was her mentor. Also (secretly) her lover—although only briefly. For Tár is one of these middle-aged people attracted to youth and inexperience, the kind who like to be adored but are perhaps less keen on sticking around long enough to be “learned.” We never meet Krista, but from our glimpses of the many pleading e-mails she sends Tár’s assistant, we gather that an affair that proved seismic for Krista barely registered on her older lover’s radar. Now Krista can neither reclaim Tár’s affections nor advance in the music industry. But for Tár, it’s as if it never happened at all. She is already on to the next distraction.

Spotting a hot young cellist, Olga, in the bathroom of her workplace, Tár later recognizes this same young woman’s shoes, peeking out from beneath those screens orchestra directors use to preserve the anonymity of “blind auditions.” Next thing we know Tár has given Olga a seat in her orchestra. Then decides to add Elgar’s Cello Concerto to the program, and to give that prestigious solo to the new girl instead of the first cello. And this move, in turn, allows her to organize a series of one-on-one rehearsals with Olga at that apartment she maintains in the city...There’s a word for this behavior: instrumentalism. Using people as tools. As means rather than ends in themselves. To satisfy your own desire, or your sense of your own power, or simply because you can.<sup>5</sup>

What’s interesting about Tár’s misuse of her own power in the ethical realm is how much it reveals about her aesthetics. Her own refined musical sensibility meant everything when she was arguing with Max, but now that she’s embarking on a new flirtation with Olga, she’s less particular. It doesn’t matter that Olga has no preferred recording of the Elgar or that she only knows the piece at all from watching Jacqueline du Pré play it on YouTube. With Tár, it’s art for art’s sake until it isn’t. Until desire gets in the way.



Why are some older people so attracted by youth, by inexperience? We are offered a potential answer when age and hard experience come a-knocking at Tár's door. There, on the threshold of her apartment, stands her neighbor: a middle-aged, disheveled, distressed, apparently mentally unwell woman who is in need of Tár's help. This woman is caring for her own sick older sister, an even more abject and forsaken creature, whom Tár is then forced to witness, half-naked, covered in her own fluids, having just suffered a fall. The old woman clings to Tár, who recoils in horror, rushing back to the curated safety of her own apartment—and into her power shower—to wash away the human stain. Later, when the old woman is taken from the building by paramedics—off to a nursing home so that her younger relatives can sell the apartment—it is Tár who becomes the very picture of human abjection, cowering in the hallway, spooked by this specter of decrepitude. In this moment she is very far from being Lydia Tár, that sophisticated, blasé Cultural Luminary who says things like “Sublimate yourself, your ego, and yes, your identity!” or “They can't all conduct, honey—it's not a democracy.” *That* Tár jogs every day to stave off middle-aged spread, threatens children, and betrays no fear or self-doubt whatsoever, not even when poor abandoned Krista runs out of hope and kills herself. Not even when the board of the orchestra advises Tár to lawyer up.

The old are vampiric. The old hoard resources. They use status and power and youth itself to distract themselves from the inevitable. The young are always right in their indictment of the old. The boomers were right about the Greatest Generation<sup>6</sup>; we were right about the boomers<sup>7</sup>; the millennials are right about us.<sup>8</sup> Still, one wonders how these same millennials, stuck with a name that seems to enshrine the idea of youth itself, will now deal with the imminent loss of their own. Up to now, when it came to generational combat, they've been right about everything, as every generation is in its own way, only ever missing that one vital piece of data about time and its passing: how it feels.

Of course, not everyone who reaches middle age has a crisis or spends their middle years manipulating the young or driving anybody to suicide. But good films are not about “everyone.” They are about someone in particular, and Blanchett’s characterization of this Lydia Tár proves so thorough, so multifaceted in its dimensions, so *believable*, that it defies even the film’s most programmatic intentions and has reportedly sent many a young person to googling: *Is Lydia Tár a real person?* She is not one in the eyes of the algorithm, but she certainly is in mine. She captures so clearly the self-pity of a predator, the vanity of a predator, the narcissism of a predator, and in one remarkable scene comes to embody the act of predation itself.

It happens after one of Olga and Tár’s private rehearsals—in which nothing remotely sexual has occurred—and Tár is now dropping Olga outside her building. But Olga has left her good-luck mascot, a teddy bear, in Tár’s car and Tár, realizing, immediately tries to capitalize, hurrying after Olga down an alley, which itself turns out to lead to a filthy, damp, abject apartment complex, about as far from Tár’s real estate portfolio as could be imagined. Olga is nowhere to be seen, and Tár can’t find the right door. Now she is in some kind of bleak inner courtyard. It is suddenly dark. Water drips. I never before thought Blanchett had a predator’s face, but stalking through this dripping, Tarkovsky-esque wasteland with those cheekbones, she looks just like a jaguar—who is now confronted by another predator: a large hound, in shadow, barking at her, a symbol of menace worthy of Kubrick. She runs, falling over onto concrete, smashing that beautiful face of hers. But the dog doesn’t attack. Nobody attacks. Yet she goes home and tells her wife and daughter that she has been mugged.

Petra, stricken, looks at her mother’s bruised and broken face and tells her, “You’re the most beautiful person I know.” Sorry, Petra: we beg to differ. But is Lydia Tár the worst person in the world? When Petra, at bedtime, asks her mother to hold her feet to help her sleep, Tár tenderly

holds those little feet by the heels, and by now we know that Tár's own Achilles' heel is not love, exactly, or even desire, but rather a powerful pride. Where we can just about conceive of a millennial making up a mugging for the purposes of pity,<sup>9</sup> Tár's aim is to further demonstrate that she is an Art Monster, who refuses to commit to any arc of trauma. ("You should have seen the other guy," she tells her orchestra.) Every generation has its fruitful and destructive narratives of self-fashioning. This Gen X commitment to emotional resilience has certainly had its utility—for slackers, we sure got a lot of work done!—but also its hidden costs. How much intimate damage was deflected or repressed when Miss Ciccone became Madonna? When Mr. Nelson became Prince? When Linda from Staten Island refashioned herself into the Cultural Luminary Lydia Tár?

I have this sense that every generation has about two or three great ideas and a dozen or so terrible ones. For example, Gen X nudged forward the good idea that men should be encouraged to be fully involved in the raising of their own children. Also: love is definitely love. We thought that artists (like Bach) were limited (like all humans), but that artworks themselves (like *The Goldberg Variations*) were limitless—sites of infinite play and boundless reinterpretation, belonging as much to their receivers as their creators. Believing this enabled many a voracious Art Monster to consume many an artwork—and to make a lot of art, too.<sup>10</sup> But "no one should pay for anything on the Internet" needed a little more workshopping, and it turns out fame is not the answer to everything—saving the planet is.

Some generational realizations are world-changing and permanent. They become almost universally accepted and are enshrined in law and custom.<sup>11</sup> Others get similarly enshrined but are everywhere ignored.<sup>12</sup> Rightly proud is the generation that manages to get its ethics enshrined in law. (Although history demonstrates that one generation alone is rarely enough to achieve this kind of truly radical change. Generational cooperation across time is



crucial.)

There is presently no law that states, “No middle-aged person should use any young adult as an instrument or tool, sexually or otherwise.” But as an ethical imperative this is one of the very good ideas of the present generation, and it would be a good thing, ethically speaking, if *Tár* adhered to it. (But it would make for a much less interesting film.) Instead, she persists. Suffering from injuries incurred during the “attack,” *Tár* goes to the doctor and gets a diagnosis she mishears as *nostalgia aesthetica*. (The actual diagnosis is *notalgia paresthetica*.) Gen X suffers from aesthetic nostalgia, yes, which itself has its uses and abuses. On the plus side, it sometimes enables us to make beguiling movies like *Tár* that allude to Tarkovsky. On the negative side of the ledger, we have often been so concerned with aesthetics to the exclusion of all else that we are liable to confuse aesthetic failures (making bad art) or reputational damage (in the cultural field) with death itself.

So it goes with *Tár*. She is more concerned with the death of her own reputation than with any possible part she might have played in the death of Krista. Her self-love is malignant—catastrophic. But because this is a midlife crisis, she doesn’t change course, and even as her connection with Krista becomes publicly known—and the storm of reputational death engulfs her—she makes an ill-advised trip to New York to give a talk, taking Olga with her. For her own part, Olga meets a cute, age-appropriate guy at *Tár*’s event and goes out for the evening with him. (The fact that Olga remains completely unaware of *Tár*’s sexual interest in her provides the few moments of comic relief in this film.) *Tár* is left in her fancy hotel, alone. Midlife crises are nothing if not delusional. After which *Tár* has nowhere to go but back in time, to her childhood home on Staten Island. We find her in her old bedroom, feeling sorry for herself, watching VHS tapes of Leonard Bernstein (Greatest Generation) talking ecstatically of music: “There’s no limit to the different kinds of feelings music can make you have! And some of those feelings are so special,

and so deep, that they can't even be described in words."

On the stairs, on her way out, Tár bumps into her brother. He doesn't look like a Cultural Luminary; he's dressed like a man who works with his hands. He regards his famous sister with pity and offers a fresh diagnosis: "You don't seem to know where the hell you came from or where you're going!" But he's wrong about that: Tár's going home, to face the music. Pictures of her and a young cellist entering a New York hotel are all over Twitter; in the eyes of the public a "pattern of behavior" has been established. In Berlin, her wife, Sharon, is waiting to hear the truth, about Krista, about Olga, about everything: "Because I deserve that. Those are the rules."

Every generation makes new rules. Every generation comes up against the persistent ethical failures of the human animal. But though there may be no permanent transformations in our emotional lives, there can be genuine reframings and new language and laws created to name and/or penalize the ways we tend to hurt each other, and this is a service each generation can perform for the one before. When Sharon accuses Tár of using her, Tár replies, "How cruel to define our relationship as transactional!" Now, that is definitely an example of *gaslighting*, and how would I know this without millennials explaining it to me? Similarly, when Sharon shoots back, "There's only one relationship you've ever had that wasn't, and she's sleeping in the room next door!"—well, that's classic Gen X *guilt-tripping*, and you're welcome.

The moment I saw the poster for *Tár* (Blanchett shot from below, conducting, arms outstretched, looking like Christ on the Cross) I knew I would want to write about it, but the film was not quite out yet, so I was sent by Focus Features to a screening of one, in what turned out to be the London headquarters of Google, that great quantifier of everything. As a committed Gen Xer, overly fond of formulating my own aesthetic responses, I went into this

movie without consulting that company's search engines, without reading a word about it—no interviews, no hot takes or counter takes—and so after the credits rolled, I felt very discombobulated, full of emotions I had no words for (yet). Later I messaged some American friends who began to inform me of the general consensus forming around this film online and the various cases for and against it that were being made, but before they could get very far with all that, I asked them please to stop. “Stand before a picture as before a prince,” suggests Schopenhauer. “Waiting to see whether it will speak and what it will say.” A not very democratic piece of advice, perhaps, but, for me, one that remains essential.

Why do female ambition and desire have to be monstrous? Why choose a woman to play this kind of monster when her misdeeds are so common among men? Or, conversely: Isn't it great that women now get to be just as monstrous as anyone else? I don't think these questions are without merit but I notice the way such prefabricated talking points function independently of any particular character or film. They don't seem to quite capture the comical specificity of Lydia Tár's stealing that pencil, or looming omnipotently over an eight-year-old, or having a manic episode, marching around her apartment playing the accordion, singing, “You're all going to hell.” (Reputational damage may not be death itself, but it can certainly *feel* like ego death and even break your brain.) And they don't come close to explaining or quantifying the beautiful scene very near the end in which Tár, having traveled to an unspecified country in Southeast Asia in search of redemption,<sup>13</sup> stands in a waterfall and, through a sheet of water, silently watches a couple of happy young people kissing.

For the first time since we “learned” Tár, we see her stripped bare at last, with no theory, no defense. No prefabricated arguments. No witty bons mots. She just has to “sit with it,” as the youngs say. She is old and they are not. Her time has passed. There is no redemption. Nothing to be said or done except feel it. And in this



positivist world—in which our friends at Google have indexed everything that is the case—how I treasure any artwork that preserves a silence or recognizes a limit! That gestures to those aspects of the human animal that “can’t even be described in words.”

*Tár* may feel politically inadequate to those who judge art solely in that fashion, but I found it to be existentially rich. And those among us who prefer our baddies to be properly punished need have no fear of disappointment. In a final scene of pure *schadenfreude*, we see *Tár* directing what appears to be a great orchestra once again. But then the camera turns to the audience: she is conducting film music, at some kind of Comic Con–type festival, to a packed theater of people in cosplay costumes and superhero suits. *Tár* has been relegated to the realm of kitsch, the lowest rung on the cultural ladder, which must mean she has been forced to subject her own good taste, her own fine aesthetic sensibility, to the demands of a financial necessity, i.e., she has “sold out.” And *that*, for a woman of *Tár*’s generation—believe me—is truly a fate worse than death.

## Letters:

Steven Sullivan

### **My Generation**

February 23, 2023

## **Zadie Smith**

Zadie Smith’s latest story collection, *Grand Union*, was published in 2019. (January 2023)

1. “My plan was to never get married.... Women almost never become art monsters because art monsters only concern themselves with art, never mundane things.” From Jenny Offill’s 2014 novel, *Dept. of Speculation*, the term “art monster” has since taken on a life of its own, appearing in many essays and Twitter handles. In April 2022 Offill appeared with

the writers Jia Tolentino and Sheila Heti in a panel at Bennington titled “How to Be an Art Monster.” It proposed to answer the question: “Has the age of the lone genius, willing to sacrifice anything and everyone in their lives for their art, come to an end?” ↵

2. This precipitous decline in social capital has of course happened before. Boomers went from idealistic flower children credited with transforming the social and political fabric of America to out-of-touch fools you were welcome to roll your eyes at: *OK, boomer.* ↵
3. A mode of thinking that had its roots in our grandparents’ generation of modernists and New Critics. Our own (minor) innovation was to transfer our critical attention from matters like the poetry of T.S. Eliot to movies and pop records. ↵
4. And consistently paid more than men. ↵
5. At one point—in a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it moment—Tár, while trying to bully a colleague out of his job, steals a pencil from his desk and hides it behind her back, for no reason at all. ↵
6. Traumatized, emotionally stunted. ↵
7. Vainglorious hypocrites. ↵
8. Irrelevant, politically obtuse. ↵
9. The most famous case of this kind might be the 2019 alleged “staged attack” on the actor Jussie Smollett. ↵
10. We inherited and adapted this idea from the writings of a motley collection of poststructuralist French boomers. ↵
11. Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.” ↵
12. Article 5: “No one shall be subjected to

torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading  
treatment or punishment.” ↵

13. Classic Gen X move. ↵

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